

INFO	LOG-00	EEB-00	AID-00	CEA-01	CIAE-00	COME-00	CTME-00
	INL-00	DODE-00	DOEE-00	ITCE-00	DOTE-00	PDI-00	DS-00
	EAP-00	EXME-00	OIGO-00	E-00	FAAE-00	FBIE-00	UTED-00
	VCI-00	FRB-00	H-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	LAB-01
	MOFM-00	MOF-00	VCIE-00	NSAE-00	ISN-00	NSCE-00	OES-00
	OIC-00	OMB-00	NIMA-00	EPAU-00	GIWI-00	MA-00	SCT-00
	ISNE-00	SP-00	IRM-00	SSO-00	SS-00	STR-00	TRSE-00
	EVR-00	FMP-00	BBG-00	R-00	EPAE-00	ECA-00	IIP-00
	DSCC-00	PRM-00	DRL-00	G-00	CARC-00	NFAT-00	SAS-00
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SUBJECT: SIBERIAN OASIS BALANCES DEVELOPMENT AND PRESERVATION

Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Begin summary. Sustainable economic development, environmental protection, and preservation indigenous northern cultures were the main themes of Consul General's visit to Khanty-Mansiysk September 14-16. The city of 70,000, which is about 650 km northeast of Yekaterinburg and could be described as Dubai on the Taiga, gleams with new European-style construction, reflecting its status as the administrative capital of Western Siberia's oil and gas region. It seeks to promote its image as a sporting and cultural capital with its annual international biathlon competition, annual ecological film festival and other international gatherings. End summary.

Riding the oil boom

¶2. (SBU) On September 15, CG met with Aleksandr Filipenko, who was reappointed Governor of the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Region by then President Vladimir Putin in 2005. Filipenko gave a somewhat rambling introduction to his region, praising the western companies that were active in the Western Siberian oil fields for their reliability as partners. When asked, however, to describe plans the region was making to prepare for the eventual depletion of oil and gas reserves, Filipenko replied that exploitation of fisheries and forests would provide a sound basis for economic activity. His reply seemed out of step with President Medvedev's recent calls for Russia to reduce its dependence on resource-based industries. Filipenko, who at age 59 is a decade younger than the heads of other regions in Yekaterinburg's consular district, seemed less focused and energetic than his counterparts.

¶3. (SBU) In contrast, Khanty-Mansiysk Mayor Gennadiy Bukarinov, 47, was vigorous and gregarious. According to the mayor, Khanty-Mansiysk's population is growing rapidly from labor migration to the north, where jobs are still relatively plentiful, and a growing birth rate. He said the city needs to rapidly develop its infrastructure and build new kindergartens and elementary schools to keep up with the population boom. Bukarinov, who was elected mayor in 2008, was obviously proud of his city's developing reputation as an international sports and cultural center. Khantiy-Mansiysk lies 200 km west of the oil industry center of Surgut. It's fresh air and clean streets reflect the area's lack of industrial development. Moreover, parks, fountains, sports facilities, and a stunning youth art academy gives residents of the compact city modern amenities not found in such concentration in other Russian regions.

Balancing Development and the Environment

14. (SBU) Concern for the northern environment was expressed by all of the CG's interlocutors. Sergey Pikunov, Director of the region's Department for Environmental Protection and Ecological Safety, spoke over lunch of the importance of his work with oil companies to prevent, mitigate, and clean up environmental damage. He said the situation has improved dramatically in recent years with strengthened legislation and constant environmental monitoring. He praised western oil companies for introducing stricter environmental controls into the Russian oil industry. He stated that cooperation between his department and industry is excellent and communication is constant. The practice of gas flaring remains a major issue in the region, however, both because of its wastefulness and because it is a major source of methane released into the atmosphere. On our approach to the Khanty-Mansiysk airport as dusk fell, the orange glow of numerous gas flares was visible on the terrain below.

Environmental Protection and Cultural Preservation Meet in Western Siberia

15. (SBU) Indigenous minorities of the Finno-Ugric group, including the Khanty, Mansi, Nenets and Komi peoples, make up about 2.2 percent of the region's population of nearly 1.5 million. Over dinner with an Open World alumnus who is an advocate of the rights of indigenous peoples, CG explored the nexus of environmental protection with the preservation of northern cultures. Aleksandr Novyukhov, leader of the NGO "Saving Ugra," concentrates his activities on strengthening legislation and advising villagers of their rights vis-à-vis both the government and oil companies. He explained that his organization has been in existence since Soviet times and has the strong support of the regional government. Relations with the industry are more problematic, because, while oil provides jobs for the local population, development degrades the environment upon which these traditionally-based societies depend for survival. Nevertheless, Novyukhov, who is a lawyer by training, considered his relationships more cooperative than adversarial and gave the impression that the long-term goal of preserving these cultures is an accepted priority in the region.

16. (SBU) A spirit of cooperation was also reflected in the comments of the young leader of the NGO "Northern Lights," which organizes environmental activities among students at the Ugra State University. Lilya Kasatkina, who is on the faculty of the ecological department of the university and an alumna of a three month environmental program at "Sea Camp" in Florida, said that the government often enlists her group as a partner in raising environmental consciousness among the population. She also noted support from local business, which donated a snow mobile to assist them in their activities. An active 44-member Public Chamber, whose leaders described a range of programs concentrating on youth development, advocacy of women's rights, and promotion of social responsibility in business rounds out a relatively positive picture of civil society activity in the region.

University Struggles to Establish Itself

17. (SBU) A visit to the university left the impression of a relatively new institution struggling to break out of isolation.

Founded in 2001, the school of about 5,000 students is well equipped and interested in expanding international cooperation. Though framework agreements are in place with a couple of American universities, actual programs have been limited to a handful of student and teacher exchanges. According to university officials, lack of funding appears to be the main stumbling block. On the other hand, in 2007 UNESCO established a center for the study of climate change and is sponsoring a multi-media center for indigenous populations at the university.

University officials expressed interest in cooperating with American institutions in the fields of environmental studies, indigenous cultures, and information technology.

18. (SBU) Comment: The benefits of the oil boom are evident in both the outward appearance of the city and the attention paid to the environment and social programs. Dark clouds loom on the horizon, however, as Russia's oil reserves are exploited. It is

reasonable to ask whether in a generation, this northern oasis will have found a sustainable alternative economic engine for development or face inevitable decline as the boom times end.
End comment.

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